

United States Department of Agriculture  
Extension Service  
Division of Cooperative Extension

WHAT MAY RURAL SOCIOLOGY CONTRIBUTE IN MEETING  
THE AIMS IN RURAL LIVING\*

J. E. Carrigan  
Director of Extension, Vermont

1.913  
C3N81  
1936  
Receipt

The aims in rural living, so well set forth by Mr. Hochbaum, obviously involve problems which rural sociology may help solve. They constitute a great challenge to the Extension Service. One of the most challenging and baffling of the problems facing the human race is that of adjusting the social set-up to changed and changing conditions so that we may attain to as high a degree as possible aims such as have been set forth. Someone once said that while we accept the fact that the world is round, we live in it as though it were flat. There seems to be a strong human tendency to live in the world as though it were static rather than as though it were dynamic.

There is a lag in making adjustments, especially economic and social adjustments to changed and changing conditions. If the Extension Service is to justify its existence it must assist in speeding up and making less painful these adjustments.

In doing this the great task of the extension worker lies in (1) locating the real problems, (2) finding the information needed, (3) getting that information across to the people in such a way that they may understand it and be able to apply it effectively to their problems.

The second step, or finding the information, is the least difficult of the three providing, of course, that the information is available. I believe extension workers are able to do this very well. They are usually fairly closely in touch with the subject-matter sources of information and are able to locate what is needed quite readily.

The third step, or getting the information across to the people in such a way that they may understand it and be able to apply it effectively to their problems, is an art. We range all the way up and down the scale with respect to ability along this line. The extension worker who has it in high degree by nature is blessed indeed. The one who can acquire or develop it likewise is blessed. The one who neither has it nor can acquire it is--not a good extension worker.

The first of the three steps, or locating the problem, is the most difficult and of first importance since without it the other two lose their

---

\* Presented February 19, 1936, at the Northeastern State Extension Conference, Boston, Mass.



direction and value. In order to locate the problem we need to become as familiar as possible with the situation by accumulating, sifting and studying a comprehensive body of facts relating thereto. Too often we are not good analysts. We do not obtain a comprehensive body of facts or, if we do, we are unable to differentiate between the pertinent and nonpertinent. Have you ever seen people who, when an issue is raised, pro and con this so long that the essential points are lost in a welter of inconsequence? And then have you seen other people who cut clean through to the pertinent point? Again we all range up and down the scale between 100 percent perfect analysts and zero percent analysts. The fact remains however that if we do not find the real problem we just cannot do anything about solving it. The person who cuts clean through usually has acquired to a considerable degree the scientific attitude of mind and mastered to a considerable degree the scientific method of approach.

You may wonder what all this has to do with the subject of what rural sociology may contribute to the aims of rural living. I hope to make the application before I'm through. Meantime, I wish to give two illustrations, which are economic rather than social, as to what I mean by locating the problem. Previous to 1916 Vermont was essentially a butter-producing State. Boston was needing more fluid milk and the price was higher for this than for butter. The milk from Vermont farms going to Boston has to be shipped over at least two railroads. Instead of a joint freight rate each railroad had a rate schedule of its own which made the freight from Vermont points to Boston prohibitively high. One of our agricultural leaders sensed the situation and had the matter brought before the Interstate Commerce Commission. A joint rate was fixed which lowered the freight charges and opened the Boston fluid-milk market to Vermont dairymen. This leader located the problem.

Another illustration: For years the Vermont Extension Service had been demonstrating the value of lime on acid soils. Yet farmers increased the use of lime only slightly. Finally one of the county agents began to focus attention on the problem of obtaining lime at lower cost, leaders became interested and finally arranged for a supply at a cost when delivered at the farm, of about one-half the previous cost. More and more farmers began to use lime, and that one county had more acres of alfalfa in 1935 than was grown in our entire State in 1930.

I use these illustrations to point out the value of locating the real problems or barriers in the way of a desirable end, if we are to speed up adjustments to changed and changing conditions. If a good analytical job is not done as a basis for an extension program, misdirected extension work is bound to follow.

How much of our work is based on this kind of an approach and how much is based on having a remedy which we want to apply? I fear we have too much of the latter. I'm afraid that much of our problem analysis is directed toward finding a place where we may use our stereotyped remedy.

Let me illustrate: For years farm management extension work apparently had for its objective getting farmers to keep a farm account book. In Vermont every few years, or perhaps with each new farm-management specialist,



a campaign was staged to place farm account books with farmers. As a result of the campaign 10 to 20 times the usual number of account books were distributed. Today I believe that less than 1 percent of our farmers in Vermont are keeping the account book prepared by the Extension Service. This is not a criticism of the account book or of account keeping. Neither is it a criticism of the farm-management specialist for teaching the keeping of farm accounts. It is a criticism of centering practically all the extension farm management activity on that one objective which is adjusted apparently to less than 1 percent of the group.

It is perhaps unnecessary to go further with illustration. However, lest the farm-management economists may feel that they were selected because they were not present, I might cite dairy-herd improvement associations and take my chance with the extension dairymen who are present. Dairy-herd improvement associations provide for a farmer member a partial accounting service, and in spite of years of intensive work, they reach perhaps 2 or 3 percent of the dairymen. Mind you, I am speaking of "dairy-herd improvement associations", and not the much more comprehensive "dairy-herd improvement work." I am not criticising dairy-herd improvement associations. But I am stressing the fact that they are a means of helping directly a relatively small number of dairymen and giving them a very special kind of service. In other words they are one remedy apparently adapted to certain problems and to relatively few people. Thus I raise the question, Should organizing and maintaining these associations be the one main objective of our doing extension work?

There are, of course, other examples which I could use to illustrate this point, and none of us is entirely free from his idols. However, I think the illustrations given will suffice.

As soon as we develop stereotyped remedies and spend our time trying to apply them rather than trying to locate real problems and bringing to bear the best information available in the most effective way, we intensify rather than extend; we narrow our service; we become progressively less effective as extension workers. When county extension agents do this they begin to lose local support and wonder why, and are inclined to blame the people. When State workers do this they begin to wonder why the county agents won't cooperate with them and tend to blame the agents. The answer is the same in both cases. We are not analyzing the situation, locating the real problems, and then adjusting our programs.

How shall we get at the real problems? Again I repeat by analysis, or accumulating, sifting, and studying a comprehensive body of facts relating to the situation. What can the people contribute to this analysis? Much. I used to think that the way to find out what was needed was to ask the people. I now feel that watching them may often be more fruitful than merely asking them. They may be aware only of the symptoms because they are not trained in the process of analysis.

On the other hand, we shall do well to discuss the situation with them. I look with hope to the development of discussion and planning groups. These



should give to both the people and also to the extension worker--training and experience in analysis. The people have always been planning, trying to make adjustments. They have been planning as best they could on the basis of the facts available to them and their ability to appraise their meaning. If these discussion groups will result in giving the people a more nearly comprehensive body of facts and in developing their ability to sift, sort, and give proper emphasis to the different facts, these people will be more apt to locate the problems. I suggest to the home demonstration folks that they consider directed discussion as well as demonstration. I hope in the development of the work with older youth we may bring this into their programs.

Now how does all of this relate to the subject assigned to me? Rural sociology is relatively new as a special line or "project" of extension work, although Extension workers, of course, have long been doing work of a sociological nature. For example, the goal of extension work in Vermont has been phrased as follows: "To assist rural people to discover the everyday problems of home, business, community, State, country, and world; think through the causes; seek a solution; and direct every effort toward such a solution in order that they may have a rich and satisfying life." If you would wish to read a report on applied rural sociology I would recommend the annual report of extension work in any State. I have purposely avoided the technical terminology or jargon of sociology about which many here know far more than I know. Instead I have tried to throw light on method of approach in extension education. I hope that the extension sociologists may profit by the early experience of other extension workers and not allow the use of stereotyped remedies to become their main objective. Some communities may need folk dancing, but because it applies to one group is not sufficient justification for using it with all groups. The ideal community organization may be beautiful to contemplate but it is apt not to fit the case. Planned recreation may be very valuable and may be overdone. All the things I have mentioned in this paper including account books, dairy-herd improvement associations, folk dancing, ideal community organization, planned recreation, and myriads of other remedies are needed and are very valuable, but they should be used only when and where they serve the purpose. It is serving the purpose that is important. Rural sociology may contribute very effectively to the aims in rural living. Man is a social being. Everything he does has its social implications. He is constantly trying to adjust his social relationships, even though he may not be conscious that he is doing so any more than he may be conscious that he is constantly trying to make his economic and biological adjustments. Rural sociologists will be helpful as they help people to work out these social adjustments whatever they may be. Remember that good extension workers are first of all good analysts. It is only when the sociologist locates and recognizes the real social problems and then brings to bear the pertinent information that he will be making his most effective contribution.